DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 030 375 HE 000 545

By-Benveniste, Guy

The 'Metadisciplinary" Approach to Policy Research in Developing Countries. Notes on the Work of the Professional Schools' Committee at Berkeley.

California Univ., Berkeley.

Pub Date 68

Note-14p.

EDRS Price MF-$0.25 HC-$0.80

Descriptors-*Cross Cultural Training, Developing Nations, Educational Innovation, *Graduate Study, *Interdisciplinary Approach, International Education, *Relevance(Education), *Research Methodology

The problem with interdisciplinary policy research in the academic community is that it is often approached simultaneously but independently by each discipline involved. A solution to this problem could be the "metadisciplinary" approach. The "meta" coalition is based on the notion that a commonality of interests between individuals of differing disciplinary backgrounds, and a shared experience in solving problems, provides the research team with a necessary common language to communicate effectively and fruitfully. At the University of California, Berkeley, the Professional Schools' Program is attempting to increase the international sophistication of the schools by financing conferences, seminars, faculty and student research, mostly in developing countries. The program is administered by a rotating committee representing the various professional schools, many of whom have had a commitment and some experience with the realities of development in low-income countries. The "rotation" and "commitment" characteristics of the commitee have prevented polarization around the interests of single individuals. The report discusses a number of "metaprojects" conducted abroad by alliances between faculty and students from several departments, projects underway, others planned, and the problems of financing for this innovative program, which is currently financed by a grant from the Ford Foundation. (WM)

ED030375

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

BERKELEY, CALIFORNIA

THE "METADISCIPLINARY" APPROACH TO POLICY RESEARCH IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

[Notes on the work of the Professional Schools' Committee at Berkeley]

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL OFFICE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY.

GUY BENVENISTE

ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF EDUCATION

CHAIRMAN PROFESSIONAL SCHOOLS' COMMITTEE 1968-69

HE 016 545

The original purpose of the Professional School Committee at Berkeley was to encourage faculty and students of the Berkeley professional schools to become involved in interdisciplinary research in developing countries. Our experience demonstrates the usefulness of a flexible administrative instrument for creating coalitions of faculty and students who share a common interest in tackling development problems they believe to be important. Out of this experience we have evolved a concept we call the "metadisciplinary" approach.

This paper tries to explain what we mean by this resounding word, and how we came to believe that this concept is useful. The paper explores some of the implications our experience may have for other professional schools in other universities where there may be much talk of getting professional schools and social science departments to work together on significant public issues and policy problems - here and abroad - but where this talk and well-meaning expectations are more often frustrated by the realities of academic provincialism and the results of the cloisonnement and specialization which academia foments.

The "metadisciplinary" concept

As William Alonso, a member of the Committee, points out, the so-called interdisciplinary approach is of limited validity when dealing with policy or planning issues.[1] The practical problem of getting different professionals to work together when they do not share a common language is well known. To be sure, the so-called interdisciplinary approach is still a sacred cow in many research financing circles; but the difficulties of implementation are also becoming better known.

As Alonso makes clear, the problem of interdisciplinary policy research in academia is that it tends to become simultaneous but independent research. "The fundamental differences between disciplines explains why so many interdisciplinary team reports are not true collaborations but collections of chapters individually authored."[2] Each discipline, each profession, has its own theories, its own ways of cutting and handling problems. Since synthesis is difficult, each profession finds that it needs to protect its own professional interests and autonomy. As a result, the sum of the parts of an interdisciplinary report often adds up to no more than the sum of each of the parts taken separately.

A solution, according to Alonso, is the "metadisciplinary" approach. What is the "metadisciplinary" approach? Essentially, it is bringing together problem-solvers who not only are versed in a particular discipline (say economics, sociology, or political science), but who also know the literature or have a sufficient direct experience of the particular substantive problems of government or social realities with which the team is concerned. People who are not removed from the world of action, but are involved in it; and who not only bridge between academia and certain external realities, but also bridge some of the fragmentation of academia because they happen to share with some colleagues in different disciplines or professions knowledge of specific problems outside of academia which provides them with a communality of interests.

Of course, the reader may grumble, so what's new? Everyone in his right mind knows that a good interdisciplinary team needs to bridge gaps and needs familiarity with problems. Why use redundant language

to describe ideals that are already pursued in the development field?

One reason for this has to do with the training of planners and development people. Alonso in his paper explores the implications of the "metadisciplinary" approach to the training of planners. An important conclusion is that one is no longer content with providing a strong footing in a relevant discipline. Broader knowledge of particular problem areas is required. In the long run, once the training implications are reflected in terms of the talent available, there would be a difference between an interdisciplinary and a "metadisciplinary" team. The first relies on people with a strong footing in a discipline area. The second on people with a strong footing in both the discipline and problem area.

One example: If you train someone in economics and send him on a five-man (educators, finance people, school architect) World Bank Mission to evaluate an education project in Pakistan, you have an interdisciplinary approach. If you train someone in economics and familiarize him with problems in education in developing countries and add him to the same mission, you begin to have a "metadisciplinary" team.

Organizing "meta projects" in the ..iversity

But the "metadisciplinary" approach also has implications for the recruiting and organizing of university involvement in policy research.

The central notion here is that a commonality of interest, a shared experience in attempting to solve a particular type of policy or planning problem, provides individuals of different disciplinary backgrounds with a necessary common language to communicate effectively and fruitfully.

The "metadisciplinary" approach consists of people getting together who want to work together because they perceive mutual professional advantages in tackling a specific problem. They are not brought together by clients because of an artificial hope that they can collectively solve an important problem.

This means some time and effort must be spent to help people who want to work together achieve this goal. Here is another difference between the "metadisciplinary" and the interdisciplinary style. The first style is a coalition generated by the searchers themselves, the second is often the result of wishful thinking by some research administrator or by an anxious client.

It is not the urgency or the significance of the problem that makes the "meta" coalition desirable, but the previous perceptions and commitments of the searchers. These perceptions and commitments are based on their common interest, on their previous involvements, on their spontaneous discovery that they have been trying to open the same door independently one from the other, each using his own expertise. In the "metadisciplinary" approach diverse people gather because of a commonality; in the interdisciplinary, they are gathered for their diversity.

A meeting of "meta" people is an intense affair, not only because it is committed to a particular problem, but because previous knowledge of this limited and delineated problem allows participants with different intellectual approaches to appreciate how their colleagues went about their work when they faced a similarly shared task-solving situation: it illuminates their ways of thinking. It can be a staggering experience simply because communication between different

approaches and points of view is achieved in terms of the way the problem is handled.

Our experience at Berkeley

The Professional Schools' Program at Berkeley is financed by a five hundred thousand dollar grant from the Ford Foundation. Its original objective was to augment the international sophistication of the Berkeley professional schools by helping finance conferences, seminars, and faculty and student research, mostly in developing countries. From the start the Program had an interdisciplinary bias; but when this bias was in fact operationalized, it increasingly became less interdisciplinary and more "metadisciplinary."

The reason is simple. The administration of the funds was placed in the hands of a rotating Committee representing the various professional schools. Most of the Committee members already had a commitment and experience with the realities of development in low-income countries. These two characteristics of the Committee (rotation, commitment) had important implications.

The Committee changed composition every year, but some members served several years to ensure continuity. Rotation of membership allowed the Committee to remain open to divergent interests and orientations. This was in contrast to more permanent institutional arrangements which usually tend to polarize around the research interests and needs of its better entrenched membership.

But commitment and experience in developing countries insured that the Committee maintained continuity of focus on one large yet limited problem area.

The result of "rotation-commitment" and the initial bias toward interdisciplinary projects led the members of the Committee to act as midwives, bringing to fruition alliances between faculty and students who otherwise might not have known or have had the opportunity of working with other colleagues or other students with similar concerns. These alliances were the reflections of common concerns, which I believe may have kept them more tightly knit than the mere availability of funds.

To be sure, the Committee has had some problems. It is never easy to organize significant policy-oriented research in developing countries. It is never easy to work with local institutions or to help develop new ones; never easy to interest faculty and students from different academic departments to work together within the framework of academic requirements, and at times under pressing political needs. Therefore, it is no surprise that there have been some partial failures, where faculty or students have decided their common interest was not enough to keep them together and "metaprojects" have become a collection of individual research designs.

Yet, I believe that one reason for the success of the Committee is the fact that it has operated with a rotating membership which prevented polarization around the interests of single individuals. Asked to encourage the joint involvement of professional schools in international affairs, the Committee spent considerable time encouraging faculty and students to discover common interests. As a result, a number of "metaprojects" were initiated and some 20 faculty and 35 students are now, have been, or will be working abroad in these and other undertakings.

Most of these projects are now under way, and in operational terms it may be too early to talk of success. What will be the quality of the research, to what extent will these teams leave something worthwhile in their host countries - these questions cannot yet be answered.

But to anyone familiar with the academic world, the fact that faculty and students from different disciplines are working together in developing countries is a huge success. A success that can be easily underestimated unless one remembers the constraints, particularly the system of rewards, under which professors and students operate in academia.

One such project, initiated by Professor Richard Meier, involves faculty and students from several departments, including Regional Planning, Sanitary Engineering, Agricultural Economics, who are now involved in a resource-conserving urbanism project in a densely populated urban area of India.

Another project brings together faculty and students from Economics, Hydraulic Engineering, Industrial Engineering, Agricultural Economics in a resource development planning effort in the Northwest of Mexico. This undertaking is a shared enterprise with faculty and students from some of the Mexican Universities of that region.

A third project brings faculty and students from Economics, Political Science, Education, and Industrial Engineering, who are studying the political economy of the educated unemployed or underemployed in India - a touchy policy area. Again close ties have been set up with Indian institutions concerned with this issue, and working cooperation has been established with Indian researchers and other U.S. workers (an economist from Michigan State) who are involved in this

problem. The project expands to far more depth research recently initiated by the Perspective Planning Division of the Indian Planning Commission.

A fourth project is concerned with participation in the process of educational planning. A group from Sociology and Education are in England to examine how the Robbins Commission Report was elaborated and how the affected institutions responded to the proposals. A similar study is planned in two other countries. The purpose here is to study the process of policy formation and national planning in education.

Other projects include a field survey of what happened to foreign students who recently attended professional schools at Berkeley. A development project concerned with the human environment of water resources technology in Africa involves political scientists with engineers. On the drawing board is an ambitious project which would be under United Nation auspices. The idea is to bring together talent from universities in Asia and in this country under a Consortium to compare and analyze how different societies handle problems of rapid social change and the maintenance of civil order. Another project being elaborated by psychologists, anthropologists, sociologists, and social workers is concerned with the incapable family in the process of modernization . . . And so on.

The ideas are there and the talent is not lacking.

One lesson of experience is that a fair amount of time has to be devoted to finding the ideas, and that encouragement is necessary if interested faculty and students are going to discuss their common pre-occupation and evolve new projects. Often the Committee has provided some of its funds for seed money to encourage small groups to get

together, bring talent from other universities, travel outside the United States, and thus formulate joint proposals for research. At times, providing a small sum to cover the cost of dinner at the Faculty Club has allowed faculty-student seminars to prosper and projects to evolve from discussions lasting over a quarter or a year's time span.

A fair amount of the time and budget of the Committee has also been spent on education. The Committee has sought to interest faculty in problems abroad when they were clearly interested in similar problems at home. Sometimes it has found that people concerned with the issues of the urban ghetto in this country were ready to talk with colleagues who had been working in India on similar problems. Conferences were organized to share experiences or explore particular areas of concern. For example, in May 1968 the Committee organized an international research seminar to discuss the issue of the adaptability of professional knowledge in different cultures. The result of this seminar, which is now being published,[3] indicated how fragile expert knowledge can be when the underlying cultural assumptions about the nature of the "good" life are exposed. Another conference may be held with UNESCO support to explore how technology is acquired in low-income countries.

Another educational program which the Committee has helped finance is an education abroad activity which develops the "metacapability" in graduate students. The idea is to select graduate students from professional schools before they begin to think about their dissertation research and place them for a short period in an operational situation in a low-income country. The first of these activities was started in India; the second, now in the planning stage, may be initiated in

Israel. Usually one or two students are selected each year from each of the professional schools at Berkeley. They receive intensive training in the language before leaving. The group then goes to the low-income country where they receive additional language and cultural preparation under the supervision of a faculty member. They are then placed for some ten to twenty weeks in an operational situation in a local institution where they work at their professional job with their local professional counterpart. The idea is to provide an opportunity to become familiar with professional problems as perceived in the field and in a very different cultural context. The idea, also, is to initiate a commitment to a problem area which would not be generated from reading books or listening to lectures in the United States.

Better and more relevant dissertation designs are expected from this fairly unique experience, but again the ability to bridge the academic barriers to shared knowledge is another by-product.

Problems of financing

This kind of somewhat spontaneous innovation, this effort at relating academia to the world around it, this attempt to create communities of interest in policy and planning, of involvement in problems abroad and involvement in problems at home does not take place without risk and is not facilitated by the system of rewards and career development in universities.

The initial five-year grant of the Ford Foundation has created an interest and a clientele for the activities of the Committee. It has taken less than three years to commit the funds received, and a momentum has now built up which it cannot meet. The question is, how to support such activity in the future?

Why is financial support necessary? Because without funds it is not possible to facilitate the formation of coalitions of faculty and students that bridge across the various disciplines and professional schools.

Internal University resources tend to be earmarked for the use of the existing traditional structures within the University; and in periods of extreme fund scarcity, as at present, innovations such as this can at best hope to receive lip service support from overburdened administrations. While considered interesting, it is always assumed that such activities can be postponed until the financial crisis is past. But in higher education the financial crisis is becoming a permanent aspect of administration, and support is permanently postponed. External sources of financing, such as foundations, bilateral or multilateral aid agencies, are more often oriented toward financing specific projects and programs. But the search for external financing for specific projects is both time-consuming and difficult enough when one academician is involved. Organizing coalitions of academicians and sending them after funds is expensive, time-consuming, and often leads to the fragmentation of the group. Having built up momentum, the Committee discovers that it need bring activities to a halt because funds are not available.

In short, if the "meta" approach is to succeed, it needs discerning help. The problem is to avoid either of two evils. First, the polarization around the single fashionable pace-setters in the academic departments or professional schools who tend to monopolize control on funds and have their own, or at most, the objectives of their departments and schools to advance. Second, the polarization around the

specialized research institutes. These organizations in due time tend to become bureaucratic structures that are the protected home of particular schools of thought; and while these formal institutions can play an important role in focusing University attention on certain geographical areas or on certain problem areas, they cannot maintain forever the type of flexibility which less permanent organizations may have, nor fulfill the functions served by the type of Committee described here.

It seems to me that our Committee serves as an important communication linkage in the well-compartmentalized structure of the University. The communications flow depends on the incentives the Committee can provide. Remove the incentives and the pattern is broken simply because faculty and students are subject to rewards that hardly foment "meta" projects. Why get involved if you know that faculty advancement or approval of dissertations is evaluated within disciplinary boundaries that become increasingly rigid? "Meta" projects are more difficult to organize. Why pay the cost if the incentives are not there and the future rewards in doubt?

I do not believe the Committee approach is the answer to all problems, nor do I believe the "metadisciplinary" approach should necessarily be the first priority of a university. Thus the "evils" listed above are not necessarily "evils" in the context of the wider goals of a university, but they can sometimes be evils in the context of the narrower goal of creating and encouraging policy-oriented "metadisciplinary" groups.

I tend to think there is much to be said for the kind of rotating Committee I have described. Such Committees need to be sufficiently

ephemeral to insure that it does not become the province of the narrower interests of single individuals, sufficiently financed and staffed to insure continuity, sufficiently dedicated to policy research to get results.

There are many ways to solve problems, and there are many ways to organize to solve problems. This is one of them, and it need not be underestimated. It applies, not only to development problems abroad, but also to those we are beginning to tackle at home.

Notes:

1 William Alonso, "Beyond the Inter-Disciplinary Approach to Planning," Center for Planning and Development Research, University of California, Berkeley, (Mimeo) Aug. 1968.

2 William Alonso, op. cit. p.7

3 G. Benveniste and Warren F. Ilchman (eds.), Agents of Change: Professionals in Developing Countries, to be published 1969.